Kathryn Parks of Amherst didn’t grow up on a farm and actually got involved with agriculture by accident.

When she went back to college, the University of Massachusetts graduate signed up for classes late, which forced her to enroll in courses that were available. She found herself taking animal science classes “for fun.” Four years later, Parks earned her undergraduate degree in animal science last May and is now embarking on a career in agriculture.

“I fell in love with it,” Parks said of animal sciences and agriculture. “This is what I want to do.”

While at UMass, Parks and other students under the direction of Alice Newth, livestock barn manager at the University of Massachusetts Center for Agriculture, have been involved with showing sheep and volunteering at the Massachusetts Sheep & Woolcraft Fair.

“We usually have about five students participate in the Fair,” Newth said. “They’re usually part of the veterinary and animal sciences program. I’ve probably been involved with the Fair for 10-12 years.”

Besides showing sheep owned by UMass at the Fair, the student volunteers assist other farms that bring more sheep than they can handle to show their animals, and work at the information booth. They also help clean and put away the sheep show area, push up bedding so the tractors can clean the barns, and feed and keep the sheep clean during the duration of the Fair.

Parks said that having extra help is also valuable to the people who organize the event.

“You get a bunch of sheep owners together and they help each other,” Parks said. “I love it. The Fair is a valuable experience for students. It connects us with a side of agriculture that we don’t get in classes.”

Newth said her main goal in getting students involved in the Fair is to give them hands-on experience with the animals. She said a number of the students could eventually become veterinarians and it is important that they be able to relate to farmers who own and handle animals such as sheep.

“Being part of the Fair gets students understanding what they might want to do once they get out of school,” Newth said. “Most of the students are urban and suburban kids. They have dogs, cats and maybe a horse. They probably wish they grew up on a farm.”

Newth said UMass will bring eight of their own Dorset sheep to show at the Fair this year.

“It’s a very friendly and participatory environment where everybody helps each other,” Newth said of the Fair. “It’s a great way to show for the first time.”

That day when Parks had to take whatever courses were available at UMass are long gone. Besides earning a degree in animal science, she is also a member of the Massachusetts Sheep & Woolcraft Fair planning committee, and the organizer of the event’s fleece show.

“We have plenty of 4-H chapters in Western Massachusetts and lots of kids who are interested in agriculture,” Parks said. “It’s very important to keep the Fair and interest in agriculture alive. My personal goal is to be involved with raising sheep. Sheep are my first love as far as agriculture goes.”